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ABSTRACT

Planning staff development programs to meet changing state education agency (SEA) needs can best be undertaken by considering first what the SEA is trying to accomplish. If we look at the priorities and emphases given by the SEA to its various managerial, service, and leadership tasks, concepts of agency role and mission begin to emerge. By examining these concepts and the legal and financial restrictions on the SEA's activities, planners can create a fairly clear picture of the possible staff development policy alternatives. Among the factors that must be considered are the likelihood of appropriate training programs outside the agency, the possibility of coordinating with local education agencies or other states' SEA's to provide programs that would be impractical for the individual SEA to provide alone, the uses to which new communications technology can be put, and the impact of changing public demand on the agency's role and its consequent training needs. While the options created by these factors are fairly universal, the policies appropriate to each state are quite specific and not touched on in this document. (Author/PGD)

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STATE EDUCATION AGENCY STAFF DEVELOPMENT: A FUNCTION OF AGENCY ROLE AND MISSION

An Issue Analysis Paper

Prepared for the Chief State School Officers of the States of Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Oregon, Montana and Washington

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Introduction

Planning staff development programs to meet changing State Education Agency needs can be best undertaken by considering first what the SEA is trying to accomplish. "Role and Mission" statements tend to be inherently stuffy, but if we look at what the agency emphasizes and the tasks to which it gives priority, concepts of implicit role and mission begin to emerge. From these concepts, accepted or altered as the agency determines, a fairly clear pattern of possible staff development policy alternatives also emerges. The range of possible policy options, though not the specific choices to be made from among the available options, is widely applicable to all SEAs, despite the very significant and sometimes crucial differences which exist from state to state. The options available, that is, are fairly universal; the appropriate policy to pursue is highly state-specific.

I. The Traditional SEA Emphasis

The fundamental tasks of SEAs have been generally described under three categories: management, service, and leadership. Unspecific--and even pedestrian--as these terms may appear, they do seem to embrace and briefly describe what SEAs do that they think is most important.

The managerial functions (sometimes called ministerial or regulatory) are those essential jobs prescribed by state constitution or statute, State Board of Education rules, federal regulations, or departmental policy: distributing funds, certifying personnel, prescribing curriculum, accrediting schools, operating special programs, evaluating and monitoring performance, and engaging in enforcement activities. Typically, the managerial functions consume more staff time and money than anyone would wish, but few would doubt that these are jobs that not only have to be done, but if done well can have marked positive effect on the educational system at state and local levels.

The service functions are primarily those which offer technical assistance--help rather than threat. Actually, these functions are very often performed in conjunction with the managerial functions, so the distinction between the two, while logically valid, becomes less sharp in actual program operation. The service activities are generally carried out by the professional specialist/consultant staff, assigned either by program (such as education of the handicapped or vocational education) or by specific organizational level (e.g., primary) or subject (e.g., science). The technical assistance given by these specific/consultants is usually considered to be the core of SEA function; it involves all fields and all aspects of the educational enterprise: planning,

curriculum development and implementation; evaluation devices and strategies, pupil personnel, and fiscal and administrative concerns.

The leadership functions are those concerned with charting new directions, providing fresh and exciting models of what educational programs could be, and working with people and organizational structures to bring about and institutionalize change. Obviously, both the managerial and the service functions can contain strong elements of leadership emphasis, but several factors associated with SEA work serve to diminish this possibility. Time, money, and enthusiasm tend to run out while the necessary regulatory and field-service functions are being performed, so leadership activities get shortchanged. Often, because educational leadership has not generally been one of the strongest emphases in SEAs, the local districts simply don't have the expectation that the state education agency can be the source of leadership assistance. For leadership, therefore, they look elsewhere.

The relative emphasis the SEA chooses to give to one or another of this triad of functions is often really not a free choice; constraints of law or funding or personnel may effectively dictate how time will be spent. But the general SEA emphasis which does emerge, for one reason or another becomes the primary determiner of staff development needs.

The analysis so far has been only general; it may be accurate as a generalization, but it is inadequate without consideration of specific SEA tasks which must be done. It is these specific jobs that delineate more clearly what actual staff development needs may be.

II. Specific SEA Tasks

Almost every piece of writing about State Education Agencies opens and/or closes with the familiar litany, "But remember: all states are different." Too frequently reiterated perhaps, even to the point of falling somewhere between a cliche and a platitude, the differences still must be emphasized. Some SEAs operate schools directly; most do not. Some have their functions mandated in almost excruciating detail in the state educational code; others have only a few tasks spelled out in the broad state charter under which they operate. Some are well staffed and well funded; many are not.

However structured, suported, or focused, SEAs nevertheless do have some tasks to perform that are so common to all as to seem inevitable. No complete list of agency jobs is possible, nor is it necessary for our purpose here, but a sampling of the kind of representative tasks common to nearly all SEAs will help give focus to the development of educational policy options in planning staff development programs. For examples, a few like these:

- "Running the shop": carrying out all of the constitutional, statutory, State Board, and federal "musts"
- Planning program modifications and new programs (including the writing of "state plans," which perhaps is not "planning" at all!)
- Helping: answering requests for service on an on-call or circuit-rider basis
- Evaluating or monitoring programs or activities as required by law or regulation
- Reporting, not only in the formal manner as required by law or regulation, but through correspondence and personal contact
- Conducting research
- Planning, attending, and recuperating from workshops and conferences

Since the list is so sketchy--and contains so much that is obvious--it perhaps serves no purpose here except for offering a concrete reminder that all of these tasks must be performed in a constantly changing environment. The tasks themselves may not be significant in determining staff development needs, but the context of change in which they are performed is of great significance.

For example, educational technology is opening new vistas not only in the educational process itself, but in how education is administered and changed. Curricular change in many fields, for example, cannot be very intelligently guided by a consultant unfamiliar with the applications of computer technology. Required reporting must be geared to the widespread availability of computerized methodologies. Electronic communications techniques may well bring marked changes in the common pattern of an SEA consultant checking out a state car and hitting the road for a week at a time. Workshops and conferences can be held without bringing all of the participants into the same physical setting.

Changes in the popular perception of what the schools ought to be doing will dramatically affect how state agencies deploy their staff members and the importance given to various activities. Whenever there is a changing emphasis in the value attached by the public to a given educational activity--special education, education for citizenship, art in the schools, career education--the SEA tasks change, and the SEA staff must themselves be developed to march--and perhaps lead--in new directions.

The changing demography and economics of the teaching profession means that more emphasis may well have to be given to retraining older teachers, and to programs of local staff development that take place in

the local district and with local determination of content and local personnel, rather than relying so much on the traditional summer course taken at the nearby college or state unversity.

Nor can we afford to overlook the effects, direct and subtle, of the Proposition 13 syndrome at the state/local levels and its corollary effects at the federal level. Program growth and programmatic innovations are likely to become casualties of the current wave of economy-mindedness. Some federal education programs are already targeted for phase-out, and others are likely candidates for the same fate. State government, reeling under the twin blows of loss of federal revenue-sharing monies and curtailment of state tax bases and/or expenditure levels, are likewise looking for places to cut back. State Education Agencies, to many political decision-makers, do not rank very high on the list of priorities in a sputtering economy.

Developing an existing staff that is to likely to be bolstered by many fresh recruits with new and up-to-date skills, a staff that is firmly entrenched and hopes to stay that way, a staff that will quite possibly shrink rather than grow in numbers--this will challenge the planners of staff development programs for SEAs.

Bearing all of these prospective changes in mind, we are forced nevertheless to develop and redevelop staff to perform a reasonably definable set of tasks. What skills will be needed?

III. Needed Skills

The specific skills that will be most in demand for SEA staff are, again, a function of what emphasis the agency chooses to give to its various roles. For example, if the emphasis is to be largely managerial, the performance of simple monitoring and enforcing functions requires of

the agency staff little more than a thorough knowledge of the regulations, ability to spot violations, and the stomach for vigorous cracking down on the violators.

But with the "service" emphasis added--not in substitution for the necessary ministerial functions, but simply considered as deserving of greater attention in the value system of the SEA--other staff skills need to be developed. Skills in interpretation, explanation, problem definition and clarification, exploration of alternatives, instituting and institutionalizing change, designing and conducting evaluation, interpersonal and intergroup communication, community relations skills--all of these suddenly become much more important than knowledge of the regulations or ability to check for compliance.

If the leadership emphasis is also added, or assumes a greater share of the agency's attention, other staff development needs come to the fore: more sharply-honed skills in locating and identifying educational areas needing new approaches; more technical understanding of the dynamics of social and political organizations; and more complete mastery of the complexities of the change process and interpersonal relations. As leadership assumes a greater significance in the "role and mission" of the agency, personnel will be needed whose skills and understanding for transcend just the field of education--the SEA will be sharing its leadership skills with a great variety of other agencies and institutions whose primary concern is with some other social good or social goal, perhaps quite far afield from the formal educational process.

IV. Means and Methodologies

We cannot really fault the traditional methods of staff development for SEA personnel on which we have previously relied. Despite frequent

criticisms--some of them painfully accurate--which State Education Agencies must endure, the general level of SEA staff performance has probably been as good as could be reasonably expected, and often superb. The two traditional means of securing good staff--prescribing specific educational training and appropriate professioal field experience prior to appointment and encouraging upgrading of skills through formal coursework while employed have been quite legitimate and often very effective.

But for several reasons, we must consider turning to other options. Not only agencies have to rely primarily on the services of present employees, rather than trusting to turnover and additional hiring to bring in new ideas and new skills, but these employees will have to learn to function in new areas and with skills they have never before considered necessary. For example, highly specialized subject-field consultants will find it necessary to offer technical assistance in more than one field--many SEAs will simply not be able to afford to have a specialized consultant for each academic area. Current federal programs will disappear, and new ones will doubtless be initiated. Public expectations of what state-level leadership should be doing for education will change.

Therefore, other options such as those suggested below will compete for attention and adoption. If less reliance, for example, is to be placed on formal college or university coursework (either because there is little staff time or motivation for formal course enrollment, or because the available courses are not specifically enough targeted to the needs of the SEA and its staff), internally-designed minicourses,

conferences, and workshops may have to become one of the means of concerted efforts at staff updating.

Such internally designed and operated staff development sessions, however, need not be inward looking. Perhaps they could be best conducted in cooperation with, not just for, local district personnel. Too often, it has been the practice to design at the state level the staff development programs which will be given to LEA personnel; why not include the latter as full co-learners with SEA staff?

Much of the staff development work could be done in regional cooperative effort with other State Education Agencies. Differences in the problems and their solutions exist even among states linked in close geographic proximity; these differences reflect important variations in historical development, current programs, and future plans of the several states. These differences, do not, however, make the idea of joint-state staff inservice programs at all unfeasible.

Nor must cooperation in staff development be limited to local school district or other SEAs. Other state agencies, as one option, might be brought into the cooperative effort. For example, Public Informtion Officers are employed in almost every state agency. They have different tasks and perform different services, but there is much commonality in the problem of interpreting to the public the work of the State Department of Conservation, or the State Department of Human Services, and the work of the State Education Agency. Bringing together these PIO's to exchange ideas, to learn new techniques and skills, to discuss effective strategies--this could be extremely useful.

Finally, there are many options open in adaptation and employment of new instructional technologies, especially those involving use of computers and electornic communication devices. It would seem reasonable

that if some of these newer ways of teaching and learning are good for kids, they should be good for staff, too.

V. Content and Structure as Determiners of Options Chosen

The suggestions, direct and indirect, supplied in the previous sections of this paper will have relevance only in the very specific situation in which each SEA finds itself. The context of the problem and the structure of the agency at the individual state level will be determining factors in choosing among the options available for planning staff development programs.

For example, staff readiness and receptivity--where the staff now perceives itself to be, and the directions in which it wants to go--will certainly determine the timing and the format of any developmental program. Likewise, the visibility the State Board and the Chief State School Officer give to the program through their support will help determine not only which elements of a program are chosen, but what degree of success can be expected for them. The allocation of fiscal resources--time and money--will serve as some indication of how seriously those in leadership positions take the staff development program. The availability of already-trained staff in specialized areas, or the willingness to import the necessary consultant skills to mount an effective program, will surely determine the feasibility of some of the options which might be elected.

Finally, and again, it is the State Education Agency's own choice of its role and mission that must be the ultimate determinant of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the policy options exercised in improving staff development.